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Mastering the Guilds' Debts in Eighteenth-Century Paris: Royal Scrutiny, Debt Reduction and State Coercion

Mathieu MARRAUD*

Abstract. The French guilds, like all the corporate bodies, were asked to contribute to the King's finances. This paper looks at the work of a royal commission – the Commission pour la révision des comptes des communautés d'arts et métiers – which was set up in 1716 to examine the financial situation of the guilds. The commission used its power to closely monitor and impose a number of constraints on the ways in which the guilds managed their revenue, expenditure and debt. Control by the state of the guilds' finances was used to facilitate the political integration of guilds into royal administration. In this respect, the development of the king's debts made it possible for the monarchy to take control of its corporate bodies which, initially, had only consented to act as intermediaries to support the king's credit.

Keywords. Guilds, Public debt, Taxes, Fiscality, Royal Control

Résumé. Maîtriser la dette des corporations parisiennes au XVIII^e siècle : contrôle monarchique, effets libérateurs et coercitifs. Comme tous les corps institués, les corporations durent soutenir les finances royales au cours du XVIII^e siècle. Cet article évoque le travail d'une commission royale – la Commission pour la révision des comptes des communautés d'arts et métiers –, établie en 1716 en vue de faire l'examen des situations financières propres aux corporations, avant l'irruption d'un certain nombre d'édits royaux dans les années 1740. La commission usa en réalité de son pouvoir pour diriger et contraindre les postes de recettes et de dépenses relatifs aux communautés. Le contrôle étatique et financier exercé sur elles servait alors à faciliter leur intégration politique au sein de l'administration royale. De ce point de vue, les dettes royales rendaient possible la mise sous contrôle de corps dont le rôle d'intermédiaires avait permis de secourir le crédit de la monarchie.

Mots-clés. Corporations, dette publique, impôts, fiscalité, contrôle royal

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The question of the guilds' debts – and the origins of their indebtedness – in the Old Regime is part of a long historical tradition in France. Guilds' debts have been generally equated with the shortcomings of self-government and the misappropriation of common funds. According to historians, debts explain the collapse of the guild system in the eighteenth century, a causal link which was already put forward by reformers under Louis XV and Louis XVI.¹ The reasons for Turgot's abolition of the guilds in February 1776 are numerous. Guilds were abolished for their backwardness, their public uselessness, their hindering of free commercial settlement in urban areas, and for slowing down the introduction of new technologies by means of an overabundance of rules and control over production. Above all Turgot abolished guilds because the King's Council had been persuaded, as early as 1710, that they carried a perpetual debt.² At the beginning of 1776, the Parisian guilds still owed 4.5 million *livres* to their creditors, a capital sum which, at the 4% interest rate, cost 180,000 *livres* per year.³ Although a lack of primary sources makes it difficult to confirm the data, these figures are probably an accurate reflection of the financial reality.

By and large, historians in their work have repeated the official discourse about the abolition of the guilds. Even today, most debates on their suppression adopt essentially the same terms as those which supporters and detractors were in the habit of using then.⁴ Although eighteenth-century criticism reflects an undeniable reality about guilds and their administration, it is important to note that the vocabulary used in discussion of the guilds belongs to a particular language which was typical of the Old Regime monarchical culture.

The specific purpose here is to look again at the debate between guilds and royal authorities on the question of "public" debt, including the origin of the debt, its nature, and of course its payment. While it is clear that there was no such thing as a public debt funded by all the subjects, on the other hand the authorities that were in charge of raising credit obviously developed discourses that extended far beyond the royal service *per se*.⁵

1. H. L. ROOT, 1994, p. 135-136; R. NIGEON, 1934.

2. S. L. KAPLAN, 2001, p. 34-35, 40-43, 237-241.

3. Archives de la Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris (A.C.C.I.P.), X 1-00(2), "Memoire sur les moyens de suppléer aux ressources que l'Etat trouvoit dans les finances ou dans le crédit des communautés de Paris", n.d. [1776].

4. P. MINARD, 2004.

5. J.-Y. GRENIER, 2006.

Guilds gradually adopted this kind of discourse over the eighteenth century. The Royal Treasury never stopped looking for new ways of funding the war effort. Among others, guilds were asked to contribute to large sums. For guilds revenue put them in a position to service loans worth dozens of millions of livres tournois. Of course the king then had to put up with the drawbacks of an insolvency on the part of the guilds, which he himself had created. It remains to be seen how he managed to contain and resolve it, and what was the structural goal he was seeking. What was the significance of the administrative solution he implemented in respect to guilds' autonomy up until the 1740s? In many ways, the king used the guilds' treasury as a means of preparing and achieving their abolition a few decades before Turgot's famous edicts of 1776.

1. Taxing commerce through its institutions

This article focuses on the *Six Corps des marchands* (or Six Merchants' bodies) which was one among the many Parisian merchant guilds. These ones had developed from the early fifteenth-century royal and urban rituals, especially on the occasion of Royal Entries where the heads of the guilds held the royal canopy as the procession progressed on its route through the Parisian streets. In the late sixteenth century, guilds which had common or related economic and legal interests were federated into the guild of the *Six Corps des Marchands*. In many respects, the *Six Corps* remained, up until their abolition, a grouping characterised by custom and informality. They had never been considered as a formally constituted institution, and moreover no law ever created or even mentioned their federation as being officially acknowledged. Yet the monarchy was keen to give the *Six Corps* an official existence and to recognize its political structure as a representative body for commercial interests.

The *Six Corps* comprised the drapers, the grocers, the haberdashers, the furriers, the hosiers, and the goldsmiths. These guilds were in permanent ideological and material conflict with the craftsmen of the capital city.⁶ In particular, merchants aimed to oversee manufacturing activities, using their economic and honorific status as a pretext. The *Six Corps* developed an increasing sense of their superiority and dignity as providers of a variety of services for the Court, by supplying armies as well as the main civic institutions, such as the town hall, the merchant's court, large parishes, etc.⁷

6. M. MARRAUD, 2014.

7. N. LYON-CAEN & M. MARRAUD, 2014.

Prominent merchants supplied uniforms, clothes, furs, jewellery, candles to the *Maison du roi* or to the royal stables. In itself, the concept of civic notability or prominence rested on this ability some merchant guilds had to set up their members in a single chain of linked powers centred on certain typical bourgeois areas within the town.⁸ One of the *Six Corps*' aims was to obtain for each of them the status of *corps*, which meant recognition as being a part of the body politic, as opposed to the more basic status of a community. Even though they did not derive their status from the crown, the *Six Corps des marchands* were tempted to operate as if they did. In effect, the *Six Corps*' objective was to establish merchant prominence whenever trade, town and state encountered each other.

Somehow, the successes of the *Six Corps* as an informal authority representing wholesalers' interests backfired: they attracted close attention from the king, in particular on financial grounds. From the Nine Years' War onwards, in the 1690s, the *Six Corps* became the target of tax policies which sought to fund military expenditure. Throughout the period, Louis XIV's ambition was to learn more about the profit merchants made from trade during the war, in order to tax it. The only way to achieve this objective was to obtain information from the guilds themselves.⁹ For twenty years, until the death of Louis XIV and the ensuing period known as the Regency, government policy with regard to the *Six Corps* materialised through the creation of *offices*, which consisted in the sale by the state of a variety of new public or semi-public functions. These *offices* did not confer major or significant privileges on the holder. No specific responsibilities were attached to them, except infringing upon those of the guilds: for example paymasters, inspectors of the registers, archive custodians. Yet they encroached on the guilds' traditional prerogatives. Thus the *offices* operated as a means of intimidation: to protect their status and rights, the guilds were compelled to purchase the *offices* or buy off government threats. Between 1691 and 1710, royal edicts and contracts with moneylenders, who advanced the capital for *offices* to be sold, demanded that guilds of merchants and craftsmen in the kingdom pay 20.9 million *livres* to the Royal Treasury.¹⁰ The *Six Corps des marchands* had to contribute 15% of the total. This share was clearly disproportionate: for instance, in 1753, the *Six Corps*' contribution to the *capitation*, a direct tax, represented 10% of the sum raised in Paris and 54%

8. L. CROQ, 2007.

9. M. MARRAUD, 2012.

10. Archives Nationales (A.N.), G⁷ 1726, D'Argenson's answer to the proposition of confirming merchants' and artisans' mastership and making it hereditary, 1710.

of the tax paid by the 120 Parisian guilds.¹¹ Their members, between 3,000 and 4,000, did not exceed 15 or 20% of all the Parisian guilds' masters at that time.

Table 1. *Main royal taxes on guilds, seventeenth-eighteenth centuries*

	<i>all kingdom's guilds^a</i>	<i>Six Corps' contribution^b</i>	<i>%</i>
1691, offices of juré or garde	3,682,672 lt.	624,000 lt.	17
1694, offices of accounts auditors	4,926,915 lt.	440,000 lt.	9
1702, offices of administrator of the common treasury	3,216,260 lt.	550,000 lt.	17
1704, offices of controller of weights and measures	4,000,000 lt.	550,000 lt.	14
1726, confirmation taxes	circa 6,000,000 lt.	429,518 lt.	7
1745, offices of guilds' inspector	6,718,049 lt.	780,000 lt.	12

Sources. (a) *Mercure de France*, Paris: Lacombe, October 1768, p. 180.
(b) A.N., KK 1340-1342, *Six Corps'* registers of deliberations, eighteenth century.

In a way, on the issue of indebtedness, the *Six Corps* stood at the forefront of commerce as great cities stood before smaller ones: in proportion, great cities were much more indebted because of the fiscal potential they had, relying on stronger public and borrowing authorities, on wider facilities to transfer the cost onto the wealthiest levels of society or those with the highest rate of consumption, while they still boasted a permanently healthier financial state than the monarchy could achieve.¹² This was how it worked with the *Six Corps*. The size of guilds like the haberdashers (more than 2,000 members) or the grocers (around 700 members), added to the prerogatives they possessed over the supply of the Court (like the drapers and the goldsmiths), and the public rights they exercised over the urban population, were all factors which helped them to bear a significant share of the costs.

Their economic power is reflected in the volume of *rentes* or annuities they paid each year to lenders. In effect, to meet the king's demands, the *Six Corps* had a habit of borrowing money. The government imposed an overall contribution on each guild, which was free to choose the methods to collect money from its members. The guild paid its contribution by means of loans which were underwritten by the masters who received bonds. Most of the time they redistributed the debt among the guilds' richest members: in 1696,

11. A.N., H¹ 1559, "Arrest qui prouve les états de répartition de la capitation dressés pour l'année 1753".

12. J. FÉLIX, 2000.

a mere 197 haberdashers (10% of the members) advanced the 200,000 lt. the guild needed to pay to the king, and just 55 grocers (8% of the members) did the same for the 45,000 lt. their guild had to lay out.¹³ Later, in 1714, the circle of haberdashers' lenders could extend to a larger social base and the bonds they issued acquired a higher public value and a stronger guarantee. At this point, only 11 of the 57 new lenders came from the guild's ranks, and 14% of the extraordinary total of 662,300 lt. raised was borne by this small group.¹⁴ In the meantime, all the guild's loans had turned into ordinary public ones thanks to the expansion of a real city-wide credit market. Prominent officeholders or financiers could now operate within it.

The context of widespread war explains such a change. Transferring credit to *corps intermédiaires* or, in other words, using the financial intermediation of corporate bodies to raise capital, was the usual way the king sustained war. The Parisian municipality was the most important of them all.¹⁵ But in reality, and in addition to state-issued bonds (*rentes sur l'Hotel de Ville de Paris*), many financiers and royal agents also borrowed by issuing a variety of bonds and others financial assets which had an impact on the liquidity of the market in the 1700s.¹⁶ Everywhere in the kingdom, minor local and judicial courts both consumed and generated different kinds of credit, to the extent that many of their functions and recruiting practices suffered enormously from royal taxation.¹⁷ Other corporate institutions, like the main guilds, were asked to bear all the costs. Of course they agreed, in exchange for confirmation or extension of their privileges. This is the model of corporate financial intermediation David Bien put forward in a famous article published in 1988.¹⁸ However, as we will see, it did not work very well, especially in the second half of the eighteenth century. Moreover it had much to do with the model of a fiscal-military state turning most of the regulatory relationships it had with public institutions into monetary ones as a means of covering immediate expenses. More than other countries, France had the capacity to mobilise resources for military purposes.¹⁹

13. A.N., MC XXXIX 187, haberdashers' and grocers' deliberations, 26th-28th January 1696.

14. A.N., MC XXXIX 271, haberdashers' contract, 18th November 1713.

15. K. BÉGUIN, 2012, p. 219-257.

16. G. ROWLANDS, 2012, p. 72-89.

17. V. MEYZIE, 2012.

18. D. D. BIEN, 1988.

19. J. FÉLIX & F. TALLETT, 2009.

It is important to note here that the whole issue of guild debt bears little relationship to the idea of the guilds' carelessness or their corrupt practices (even though such criticisms cannot be totally dismissed). In practice, the merchants of the *Six Corps*, several of whom were heads of major trading companies, were well versed in book-keeping and running large businesses. There is no reason to doubt these merchants' abilities to administer the *Six Corps*' common treasury or funds. Within the guilds, access to corporate responsibilities was normally restricted to the very successful shop owners, and measured in terms of their long-established wealth.²⁰ In other words, the guilds' officials were well qualified to manage their finances. These were necessary conditions for anyone to make a successful attempt in guilds' elections to the main posts of *garde* or *juré*. The prominent position of the city put the 'rulers' of the *Six Corps* in an absolutely dominant position for dealing with the private and public credit markets. So, the question of guild debt must be handled with some caution by historians. It has to be considered as part of a wider process of assessment of taxable wealth by the state for the purpose of funding the king's wars. And this was particularly true in the case of the *Six Corps*.

It is now possible to examine the extent to which Louis XIV's reign can be considered as particularly harsh in its tax policy towards the guilds. Under Louis XV, between 1745 and 1770, the *Six Corps* lent about 3,583,000 livres to the government. By comparison, between 1690 and 1715, they lent only 2,877,000 livres, or a sum which was 20% less.²¹ The financial impact of the Austrian War of Succession (1741-1748) and the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) on the Parisian guilds was remarkably similar to – if not larger than – the later wars of Louis XIV's reign. So eighteenth-century royal policy was clearly built on fiscal desire to keep pace with economic growth and to siphon off part of its profit by continuing to tax merchant guilds' treasuries rather than private incomes.

2. Ascertaining and qualifying the guilds' debt

In the eighteenth century, the monarchy did not simply continue to levy taxes on urban institutions. It did so while at the same time, seeking to exert control over the guilds' accounts. On 3rd March 1716, a royal commission was created for that purpose. It emerged from the Regency government's wish to settle war debts the king's death left behind. As with similar commissions,

20. M. MARRAUD, 2009, p. 123-172.

21. A.N., H² 2120, Taxes paid by the *Six Corps* of merchants since 1691 [circa 1760].

its power proceeded from the King's Council and its members were selected from among the most able and senior magistrates. It was chaired initially by a *conseiller d'État*, which was the highest magistracy position of the whole kingdom, after the *chancelier de France*.²² The aim of this newly established commission was to audit the guilds' accounts. In theory the guilds had from this point on to submit their registers to the king's officers once a year. That had never previously been the case. What was initially intended was as an "extraordinary" royal commission soon transformed into a standing one, as its members claimed guilds had to submit to their authority. From 1716 onwards, and for a period of more than thirty years, the *Six Corps* opposed the commission's activities, on the grounds of their long-established autonomy in administering their property, whether or not this brought them beneficial incomes.

In eighteenth-century France, the guilds considered themselves moral persons with financial autonomy. Autonomy was the very foundation of any community. Management of internal rights (like raising taxes on its members) or external rights (like levying taxes on goods) were two aspects of unitary existence as a public body. Consequently, the *Six Corps* perceived the work of certification or invalidation which that royal commission sought to exercise over their traditional customary rights as having no legitimacy. In doing so, they came into conflict with ministers. The *Six Corps* refused to present their registers. Although many other guilds followed suit, the *Six Corps* were more successful. Overall, crafts guilds' resistance to the commission simply failed: as early as 1717, for example, the small guild of the public letter-writers complied with the commission's wishes, the goldsmiths submitted in 1723, and the pastry-cooks in 1726.²³

Taking advantage of their status as corporate bodies, the Parisian merchants alleged that they could not be equated with other guilds, and therefore could not be asked to comply with the Royal Council's decisions pertaining to a guild's debts. The booksellers expressly contended too that it was impossible, with such a measure, to equate them with simple craftsmen's guilds.²⁴ Many rulings were made in the 1720s, some of them involving severe measures, such as penalty fees in the case of delay or late compliance, or civil imprisonment against the *jurés* or *gardes*, the officers whose personal responsibility was to rule the guilds and to keep their registers. As a result of such rulings, after 1740 it was a commission

22. A.N., V⁷ 421A-B, verdicts of the commission of guilds debts revision, 1716-1789.

23. A.N., V⁷ 421B-443A, audits of guilds' accounts.

24. A.N., V⁷ 421A, verdict of the commission, 17th March 1723.

member who collected the guilds' surplus and executed debt payment. As can be expected, the *Six Corps* were the last of the guilds to obey: they surrendered only in 1739, a means of asserting, once again, their distinctive status as merchants and notable men of the city by contrast with craftsmen who had to act upon the king's will long before they did. In 1741, they still wrote in their register of deliberations:

"Until now, through all the steps they took [...] the *Six Corps* have always been told that they would be distinguished from the arts et métiers, and there is more than one reason for hoping it is so."²⁵

The *Six Corps* were particularly fearful of the way people and private customers, and their public creditors too, would react to seeing their accounts checked by high magistrates whose function seemed so similar to that of a special court. The royal commission on guild debts insisted that they submit all of their accounts going back to 1689, or half a century earlier, the very moment when the guilds had had to buy royal offices for the first time. Nevertheless the *Six Corps*, sure of the previous *lieutenant général de police* Marville's favour, were still able to secure his presidency of the commission in 1755.²⁶ The Paris *lieutenant général de police* was in charge of all aspects of the life of the city, including corporate urban institutions.

It is difficult to explain why, in the second half of the eighteenth century, such powerful guilds as the *Six Corps* were still confronted with the problem of debt or lack of revenue. The archives of Parisian guilds were destroyed by arson during the Commune of 1871, and only scraps of information still remain. The King's Council constantly argued that guilds were prisoners of a self-perpetuating debt producing interest on arrears and that they could not escape from this evil. However this argument is shaky. Firstly, any urban community financed its debt through short-term credit operations, coming up against a constantly extended single sum borrowed, renewing it almost like a perpetual one, and making it very long to amortize because of a succession of manipulations and conversions.²⁷ Urban corporate bodies were not put under royal guardianship anyway. Secondly, from 1726, the government ceased to manipulate currency. By this time, guilds had taken various opportunities during the Regency to convert their loans into new ones by reducing the interest rate they paid to their lenders. Annual repayment had always been the biggest obstacle the

25. A.N., KK 1342, *Six Corps*' register of deliberations, 4th January 1741.

26. A.N., KK 1342, *Six Corps*' register of deliberations, 3rd March 1755.

27. M. COURDURIÉ, 1974, p. 110-113.

monarchy came up against in trying to abolish its debt.²⁸ In the absence of primary sources lost in 1871, it would seem that the main Parisian guilds were successful in converting at a lower rate the interest rates on the bonds they had issued. Under Louis XV, as already mentioned, the *Six Corps* were still able to borrow for the benefit of the Royal Treasury. In 1745, they contributed 43% of the total value of the *offices* purchased by Parisian guilds to meet demands in capital from the Royal Treasury. In 1759, the *Six Corps* complained that they were overloaded with 600,000 *livres* of annual interest for money borrowed for the king,²⁹ most of which, 514,000 *livres*, came from a loan issued the previous year to pay a confirmation tax.³⁰ The mighty drapers and haberdashers managed to reduce the loans they owed from a capital of 400,000 to 30,000 *livres* between 1704 and 1745 because of their control over the Parisian Cloth Market (la Halle aux draps). That is the main reason why the king kept them under his control during the entire eighteenth century, and kept taxing the drapers and haberdashers, transforming a temporary measure into a permanent tax on goods delegated to the guilds.³¹

From these figures, it is possible to infer that the guilds' long term debt issued on behalf of the king was minimal. It was all the more successfully contained since the *Six Corps* improved their annual rates of new masters admitted to the guilds. Among the haberdashers, the average grew from 90 per year in the 1730s to 140 in the 1770s.³² So the entrance fees increased in the same proportion. In fact the number of new masters admitted within the *Six Corps* exactly mirrored the peaks of royal taxation on their treasuries.³³ Indeed, the financial balance they reported annually to the commission showed a surplus. For example, during the 1730s, the annual revenues of the guild of grocers already exceeded expenditure by 20 to 50%.³⁴ Their financial situation was very different from that which obtained during Louis XIV's wars. Even royal texts establishing new taxes on all guilds of the kingdom in 1745 had to acknowledge that these were the consequence of the guilds'

28. F. R. VELDE and D. R. WEIR, 1992.

29. A.C.C.I.P., X 1-00(1), "Memoire des Six Corps contre les brevets hereditaires", 1759, p. 2.

30. A.C.C.I.P., X 1-00(1), "Memoire contre le projet d'accorder à toutes personnes sans distinction la faculté de faire le commerce en gros" 1759, p. 6.

31. A.N., H² 2165, "Observations des gardes en charge du corps de la draperie-mercerie, régisseurs des droits de la halle aux draps de Paris", 1781.

32. A.N., Y 9323-9332, registers of mastership receptions in the Parisian guilds, eighteenth century.

33. M. MARRAUD, 2010.

34. A.N., V⁷ 428, audit of grocers' accounts.

regained financial health. Therefore, one can argue that the government, by forcing guilds into debt, enabled the king to spearhead a campaign whereby guilds had to submit to the authority of the royal commission, and over their accounts and registers to the king's magistrates.

If the *Six Corps* was not particularly in debt, we can speculate what the purpose of the royal commission was. Some in the commission said that the *gardes* had been given too much authority to levy extraordinary fees on goods to service the interests of the sums the king asked them to borrow on his behalf. Having denounced the high prices that ensued, the commission should normally have pointed at the necessity of reducing taxes weighing on goods and cancelling all the corporate debts.³⁵ Such an argument could not be reconciled with the fact that the Royal Treasury continued to transfer fiscal competence onto urban corporate institutions throughout the eighteenth century. What is certain is that the commission's aim was to obtain disclosure of the guilds' accounts. It wanted to force disclosure of the guilds' budgets because of suspected concealed financial techniques. If we look at the wording of the king's orders, we can see how he made use of a wide set of condemnations and disapproving sentences that all belong to the language of reproof. The king's orders paved the way for a series of political sanctions whereby he laid the foundation of his guiding financial principles. That is the most striking feature of the policy of government control: from the 1740s onwards, the monarchy challenged old institutional autonomies by making clear its intention to punish. 'Omission, disorder, lack of discipline' were condemned by the king.³⁶ In other words the magistrates were more interested in denouncing the accounts than in simply checking them. After all, the commission was at its core a judicial body.

How did it proceed when examining the accounts? In practice, all of the guilds' expenditures resulting from the everyday guild activities were struck off: they were considered to be useless or suspicious. This is the case, for instance, of expenditure for candle gifts at Candlemas, of costs for new parish bells when the guilds acted as godfather, costs for renewal or repair of liturgical objects, donations in kind to guild officers or servants. In 1766 the hosiers expressly complained about the submission of accounts to which they were forced.³⁷ Even charity expenses which the haberdashers' *gardes* incurred for poor members were deleted on the pretext that the

35. A.N., V⁷ 443B, "arrêt du Conseil", 7th December 1739.

36. A.N., V⁷ 421A, ruling of the commission, 7th September 1726.

37. A.N., KK 1342, *Six Corps*' register of deliberations, 22nd April 1766.

lieutenant général de police had not stamped the lists of beneficiaries.³⁸ Suspecting the guilds' *gardes* of protecting many of the members, and of attempting to reduce their contribution to the royal taxes, the king's *lieutenant* wanted to make sure they deserved to be cared for in that way. It is true that charity expenditure saw its share of the guilds' budget increase in the eighteenth century: the goldsmiths devoted 25% of their outgoings to it.³⁹ Among the grocers, money shared out to poor masters increased by 400% between 1709 and 1760, whereas the total number of masters only rose by 25% during the same period.⁴⁰ It seems obvious that the *gardes'* policy tended more and more to protect the weaker shops or businesses from any selling off or removal from the list of guilds. Maybe this was the paradox of the tax levies by the king reinforcing such community feeling within the merchant guilds. However, while auditing the accounts, the commission's magistrates matched them against public accounting values where the notion of corporate membership was intentionally omitted, as this was illegal from the royal viewpoint. Submission of the guilds' registers meant that an institution of self-government was now subjected to a system of restriction. Guilds' financial as well as moral authority was transferred to a bureaucracy of royal agents. The latter aimed to normalize the functions of the guilds by applying to them a model taken from the administration of public funds. Whatever the *Six Corps* sought to gain in asking for a general amnesty in 1766, they never obtained it.⁴¹ After the restoration of the guilds' organization in August 1776, the commission was renewed in 1778 and operated unchanged up until 1790.

The second purpose of the commission was to label the guilds' debt, to re-categorize it in accordance with the king's wishes, that is to say to make it a royal debt. Insofar as guilds' debts ensued from purchase of royal offices and were serviced by a tax, the debt could be considered as nothing less than the result of guilds handling royal money. Drawing on its self-conception as a general public body, the monarchy considered it its duty to include and guarantee any form of public credit or exchange. Identifying the guilds' treasury principally as a debt, and furthermore as a royal debt, the king found the best way to ask for this ritual of the submission of the registers. This meant moving the guilds within the king's direct jurisdiction, thereby integrating the question of accounts within the wider new interpretation

38. A.N., V⁷ 435, audit of haberdashers' accounts, 1771-1774.

39. A.N., T 1490(232), "Compte de Mr Louis Mercier, année 1750".

40. Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, ms CP 4999, grocers' accounts, 1709; A.N., V⁷ 428, verifications of grocers' accounts, 1760.

41. A.N., KK 1342, *Six Corps'* register of deliberations, 8th November 1766.

of the guilds' political independence. So the driving force behind the commission's work appears to have been the political will to officially install the higher royal jurisdiction, and then, through the agency of a debt administration, to try to classify guild funds as royal ones.

Consequences were not slow to follow. A series of royal decrees were issued in the 1740s which emphasized strict monarchical control over the *Six Corps*' debts, and, more importantly, over their revenue and expenditure. The Royal Council used its power to closely control all the aspects of the guilds' daily life, in particular allotting a scale of maximum expenditure to activities such as confraternities' outgoings, meals, or journeys to meet the courts of justice or the ministers. Even the smallest repair costs to guilds' property needed to be stamped and approved by the Paris *lieutenant général de police*. All the pensions the guilds paid to the poor had to undergo the same treatment. The commission oversaw the implementation of its decisions and invalidated every instance of overspending. The accountant *garde* even had to pledge his private responsibility in case of liabilities.

Table 2. *Goldsmiths' itemized expenditure in 1742, as stipulated (i) by that guild and (ii) by the King's Council*

	(i) required outgoings	(ii) fixed outgoings
Religious duties	2,500 lt.	2,200 lt.
Board outgoings	1,800 lt.	4,800 lt.
Meals outgoings	3,500 lt.	including meal outgoings
New Year's Day presents outgoings	350 lt.	
Journeys outgoings	700 lt.	
Gardes' fees	1,300 lt.	1,300 lt.

Source. A.N., KK 1351, goldsmiths' register of deliberations, April 1742 ;
idem, AD/XI/17, arrêt du Conseil, 17th November 1742.

A lot of clues point to the conclusion that the *gardes* had no great respect for the articles include in the King's Council rulings of 1742, especially those relating to charities: in the 1750s, the goldsmiths' expenditure exceeded between 15 and 35% the maximum fixed by the decree. In 1750, the guild's administrative costs reached a peak of 80% more than the upper limit the decree fixed.⁴² The grocers acted in the same manner: during the six years that followed the decree of 1742, their board overspending even increased

42. A.N., V⁷ 436, audit of goldsmiths' accounts.

from 5 to 25%.⁴³ Even though the Royal council got the *gardes* involved in the decree-writing process, clearly they were not able to conform to the financial regime the king asked them to adopt. Only the drapers, since they formed the very first of the *Six Corps*, appeared to show consideration for all the clauses, even though it is possible they enjoyed preferential treatment: the magistrates' reports mention the economic power of the guilds and their ability to supply the Court and the army.⁴⁴ In 1767 the *Six Corps* obtained the cancellation of the unfavourable rulings the commission passed concerning the hosiers' accounts.⁴⁵ The commission's decisions all had the distinctive feature of resulting from a negotiation that inevitably involved the political and economic weight of the guilds acting for or against them.

The fact remains that the monarchy worked towards the rationalisation of the guilds' finance using criteria drawn from a world totally alien to that of the guilds. In fact, the king dispossessed the *Six Corps* of their financial liberty, introducing financial principles relevant to royal companies or officeholders. This policy was pursued until in 1744 a decree laid down general regulations that gave supervision of the *Six Corps* to the *lieutenant général de police*.⁴⁶ As a result, this officer had authority to sign the accountant's register; he also checked bills, fines or confiscation of goods; he prohibited discounts on mastership fees (*droits de maîtrise*); he vetted any borrowing request. Some of the *lieutenant de police*'s authority over guilds was already in existence; but the royal decree of 1744 formulated a clearer and stronger regulation of the *Six Corps*. Goldsmiths referred to measures of 'servitude' and 'degradation' in speaking of these new regulations.⁴⁷ In spite of this decree, commission magistrates remained in overall charge of judging the accounts annually, and in 1770 the *Six Corps* failed in an attempt to be accountable to the *lieutenant* only.⁴⁸ The king was permanently suspicious of the closeness that his *lieutenant* could develop in the long run with institutions he too ruled as regulatory protector.

Although the *Six Corps* were required in 1739 to submit their registers, the commission waited till the 1750s to actually monitor these documents. We can speculate that this extension of time was meant to put pressure on the guilds and make them recognise the king's potential authority. The

43. A.N., V⁷ 428, audit of grocers' accounts.

44. S. L. KAPLAN, 2001, p. 51-56; A.N., V⁷ 428, verification of drapers' accounts.

45. A.N., KK 1342, *Six Corps*' register of deliberations, 18th March 1767.

46. A.N., AD/XI/17, "arrêt du Conseil", 31st July 1744.

47. A.N., KK 1352, goldsmiths' register of deliberations, 28th April 1773.

48. A.N., KK 1342, *Six Corps*' register of deliberations, 15th December 1770.

Royal Treasury was preparing itself to impose new taxes on the guilds after the War of the Polish Succession, which had just ended (1739). Sixteen years later, this potential turned into actual administrative control. Neither refusal nor hesitation from the *Six Corps* was possible any more. Accounts were submitted from that moment on, with ten to fifteen years' delay before they were officially judged and validated. The accession in 1745 of Machault d'Arnouville to the post of *contrôleur général des finances* visibly marked a renewal in the government's agenda and relationship with city institutions. Liberal thinking was clearly introduced into political practices by the *intendant des finances* Trudaine up until these years.⁴⁹ The guilds then had to obey new procedures for bookkeeping through licit and illicit financial categories. From the monarchy's point of view, the community was no longer a daily professional link between masters but an establishment for collecting and paying fiscal duties, for entering the service of consumers and providers under the king's regulation. At the end of the process, of course, it was no longer useful to allow the guilds to sustain a credit relationship that the monarchy felt strong enough to guarantee by itself. So the abolition of the guilds in 1776 can be understood as the outcome of an evolution that transformed customary trade institutions into state intermediary banks. Once the royal debt owed to them was annulled there was no reason for the corporations' continued existence. Doing away with them also meant removing a troublesome creditor. By restoring the corporate order and the *Six Corps* almost immediately themselves (August 1776), once more the king put guilds back into a subordinate role as suppliers of money: they no longer had the full revenue of their entrance fees at their disposal, but only a quarter of the total; the three-quarters that remained was directly transferred to the king's treasury.⁵⁰

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From many points of view, the alleged insolvency of a famous commercial federation like the *Six Corps des marchands de Paris* was nothing other than an opportunity for the king to achieve several objectives. Firstly, to scrutinise the finance of corporate bodies with a view to aggregating them with what was called the *denier du roi* [the king's monies]; secondly, to put every financial activity in the kingdom under royal control; and thirdly, to illustrate the king's power of categorization and political reshaping of traditional customs into public administrative practices. It is difficult to

49. P. MINARD, 1998, p. 316-321.

50. Bnf, F-21193(22), édit d'août 1776.

imagine that, without their increasing role in bringing down the royal debts, the *Six Corps* would have developed the kind of views that they did about their *public authority*, *public utility*, even the *bien public* they worked to, or the service they rendered to the *public*, which the documents they produced mentioned as far back as the 1710-1720s. Thus, all customary referents slowly disappeared from their textual practices (the appeal to precedent, civic privilege or liberty) in favour of the characteristic vocabulary used within royal institutions.

Independently of all the meanings attached to such notions, the guilds' accounts entered a public sphere in so far as they happened to be checked by a public institution, in other words an institution shaped by a royal delegation, which could only be expressed in terms of *puissance publique*. And that was the way the government understood it. In reality there was no policy on the publishing of the guilds' accounts by the monarchy. Yet the royal magistrates in charge of controlling the guilds during the second half of the eighteenth century thought they really were disclosing and punishing old-fashioned mismanagement, modernizing them via the same public norms that all treasurers or tax collectors had to uphold and comply with. In fact, they took over control of corporate bodies which actually had agreed to act as intermediaries for the king's debts and were excessively self-governing in the way they managed it. That is the main reason why some great merchant guilds like the *Six Corps* had to be finally incorporated into the royal administration, and why the financial control by the state was used to facilitate this political integration. It is possible to argue that guilds' insolvency, rather than being another impediment to the finances of the state, created an opportunity for the government to manage the guilds as a kind of royal service, thereby allowing the king to interfere in their financial proceedings, and then to cancel their time-honoured autonomy. In this context, transparency meant making use of sovereign power to force guilds into releasing their accounts and denying them corporate autonomy in the management of their debts, which thus became and were declared to be public debts. From this point of view, the abolition of the guilds in 1776 was merely an ultimate integration of credit from trade and merchants into the political capacity of the monarchy to secure it for its own sake.

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